

A
DAILY
THOUGHT
FOR
LENT

REV. CHARLES M. HERBST

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FOREWORD

The idea of Sacred Liturgy as an instrument of instruction, while not lost, certainly has not enjoyed the prominence it ought to have. This has been particularly true in the Roman Rite. Our eastern brethren, both dissident and uniate, have to this day a deeper appreciation of the pedagogy of the liturgy than we of the west.

Along these lines the author feels that the simplification of rubrics decreed in 1955 reopened another liturgical door that had been but slightly ajar for centuries. We speak here of the option given the celebrant to use the ferial Mass-formularies during Lent. Composed as they were, among other things, for the final instruction of catechumens, they provide an opportunity to imitate to some extent the catechesis of the early Church.

However, the press of our time-clock civilization posed a problem: How to utilize the instructional material incorporated in these Mass-formularies. Work and school schedules in many instances seem to preclude the possibility of holding the participants at these Masses even a few extra minutes for a short homily. As a substitute the daily thoughts that constitute the material of this book came to be prepared. They were duplicated and made available to those attending Mass each weekday of Lent.

Together they have no central theme; that is, they do not follow a logical sequence of ideas or develop a thesis. They might be described as "random thoughts" suggested by the fore-Mass propers of each Lenten weekday. Originally they were not written for publication; rather they were intended for the people of one parish. The suggestion to publish them

came from another source. Certainly the thoughts are not original.

Yet the author would like to hope that God will use them to jar some souls loose from their spiritual complacency. There are minor virtues, if so they may be designated, that are easily overlooked and there are faults that are not recognized as such. There is also a hope that they will do a service to Sacred Liturgy in arousing an awareness that the fore-Mass propers were prepared as instruments of instruction in Christian doctrine and Christian living.

Priests in parochial work, the author among them, have long regretted their inability to fulfill adequately the teaching office entrusted to them. After school years too few adults receive formal instruction from their pastors other than what they hear on Sunday mornings. By force of circumstances little time, certainly not sufficient time, can be devoted to these Sunday instructions because of crowded Mass schedules. Thus these daily thoughts were prepared with the added notion that they might partially make up for this lack.

There is no implication that the thoughts that follow exhaust the instructional potential of the Lenten Mass propers. Certainly others have expressed them better. Nevertheless, despite their imperfections, the author presents them with the prayer that they may profit souls.

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A DAILY THOUGHT
FOR LENT

Ash Wednesday

From ancient times sprinkling ashes on the head has been a symbol of humility before God and an expression of penance and repentance. It retains such a meaning today when ashes are sprinkled on our heads to remind us that we came from dust and to dust we shall return. In receiving the ashes we tell God in effect of our intention to do penance for the sins of the past and to beg His mercy and forgiveness. It is regrettable that the ashen cross on the foreheads of many is a mockery. They receive the ashes with no intention of doing penance.

For those in the prime of adult life Mother Church has imposed a penitential fast. Though not constrained by the rigor of the law, neither the young nor the old are excused from penance. Everyone alike must deny himself something by mortification of the senses.

While it is true that the legal fast as well as self-imposed mortifications are acts of individuals, they are more. Though each one lives his own life, he does not do so in isolation. By baptism each one of us became incorporated as a cell in the Mystical Body of Christ. Thus whatever we do as individuals has overtones in the whole Mystical Body. The penance I do is joined to the penance of my neighbors, first of all on the community level, the parish, and then community penance is joined to community penance until every echelon of the Church is represented. In the end one vast penitential act is offered to God in supplication for deliverance and redemption.

This is what Lent ought to be. It must sadden Christ to know that there are unworking cells in His Mystical Body, tissues that the Divine Surgeon may be forced to cut away lest they create illness in the whole body. Certainly those

who go to Mass today do not go as hypocrites. They approach the altar rail in the spirit of repentance with the will to make reparation for their sins by salutary acts of penance during the whole of Lent. Certainly they accept the ashes as the first act of humility, indicative of their willingness to appease God.

Almost the whole burden of the Mass formulary for today is a petition for the mercy of God with the acknowledgment that all of us are sinners in His sight. We beg that the fasts and penances we perform be profitable to us for salvation.

May God grant that we enter this Lent with humility of spirit. May He be merciful to us and accept our sacrifices for ourselves and for the Church. Let us hope that none will flag in the resolutions so bravely undertaken on this first day of penance, persevering with Christ through His sacred Passion to His glorious Resurrection.

THURSDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

In the early centuries of the Church convert instruction extended over a period of three years or more. This period was called the *Catechumenate*. Adult converts were always baptized at the evening vigil service of Easter. The candidates for baptism were given their final intensive training, together with examinations called *scrutinia*, during the holy season of Lent. The trends of this final training are reflected in the Mass formularies for the days of Lent.

The prayers and readings of the fore-Mass for today are taken up with the thought of trust in God's willingness and ability to answer prayer. There is much profit to be gained from meditating on these lessons.

Today with our high standard of living, based exclusively on material things, we too often forget that there is a God in heaven whose providence looks out for us. We sometimes make the error of thinking that every material benefit we seek is dependent upon our own efforts exclusively. Both the Lesson and the Gospel of the Mass for today detail the stories of men who asked God for the gift of physical health. In the Lesson King Ezechias is sick unto death. He asks the Lord to grant him more time and he is promised an additional fifteen years. In the Gospel a Roman centurion begs our Lord for the health of his paralyzed son. In both stories are examples of trust in God's power to grant the favor asked.

From the ill-informed we sometimes hear the argument: If God knows everything, He knows what I need. Hence, there is no reason to ask because, if He wants me to have it, He will give it. Nothing could be further from the truth. God insists that we ask for the favors we want. "Ask, and you will receive; seek and you will find; knock and you will

gain admission. In fact, only he who asks receives; only he who seeks finds; only he who knocks gains admission" (Lk. 11:9-10). "Will (not) your Father in heaven give what is good to those who ask him?" (Mt. 7:11.) "I tell you with the same assurance: when any two of you are in agreement here on earth regarding anything they ask for, their prayer shall be granted by my Father in heaven. Where two or three are assembled in my name, there I am in the midst of them" (Mt. 18:19-20).

If we must ask God for material benefits, how much more important is it that we seek the spiritual aids we need in doing His holy will? The man who trusts in his own moral strength is doomed to fall. He has forgotten God's words: "Without me you can do nothing" (Jn. 15:5). Though it sounds paradoxical, it is true. We must pray as if everything depended upon God, while we act as if everything depended upon ourselves. God will never desert those who put their trust in Him, but He will confound everyone who puts all of his trust in himself.

FRIDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

Every Mass formulary has a unity of its own; some thought, some virtue, some spiritual guidance binds it together as a whole. Upon studying the Masses for Lent we soon become aware that the selections from Scripture and the prayers composed by the Church are not haphazard, but designed.

The thought of the Mass for today revolves around the idea of love of neighbor. We hesitate to use the words fraternal charity, lest they be misunderstood as something unique to Christianity. We must never be confused. The law of retaliation — an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth — was a legalistic device of human retribution in the Old Testament. In no way did it abrogate the divine law of love of neighbor which existed from the beginning.

In both Old and New Testaments we are told of this second great commandment; it takes second place only to the love of God. For the most part, converts under instruction when these Masses were composed were pagans who had known nothing of the God who is Love. They had to be taught the law revealed by God and reiterated by His divine Son.

Read the Lesson of this morning and see God's displeasure with the Jews. Their fastings, their prayers, and their pious practices were not acceptable to Him, so long as they continued to quarrel, to cheat, and to oppose their enemies. And in the Gospel our Lord tells His hearers that there is no blessing in loving those who love us and greeting those who belong to our own group to the exclusion of others. Everyone is a child of God. He permits the sun to shine on the good and the evil alike. He bathes with His rain the just

and the unjust. "Be perfect, then, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt. 5:48).

As St. Augustine puts it, God hates sin, but loves the sinner. We are made terribly aware of this when we meditate on the life and sufferings of our Lord. He came into the world to redeem helpless man from sin. The motive which prompted Him to do so was the all-embracing love which is God.

No reasonable person would claim that the practice of love of neighbor as outlined by Christ is easy. Virtue is never easy. It would be foolish to expect an eternal reward, if it were easy. To bear slights and insults, to face unjust accusation patiently, to be belittled and demeaned is not easy.

This is the love that prompted Christ to pray for His persecutors on the cross, the love that made a Stephen beg forgiveness for those who stoned him, the love that made the martyrs in the face of death pray for those who condemned and killed them. This is the love that made saints like St. John Bosco, St. Isaac Jogues, and Frederick Baraga. You, too, are called to be saints. This is your vocation.

SATURDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

This is the fourth day of Lent. Can you look back and see your resolutions fallen off with the ashes of Ash Wednesday? Are you making excuses for yourself already, such as: "Sunday isn't Lent." "God doesn't expect me to give up everything." "Under normal conditions I'd do it, but this year it's out of the question"?

Too often there is a basic failure to comprehend the source of Lenten restrictions. It is neither the Church nor the priest that expects us to do penance. It is God who expects it. True, it is the Church who made the laws of fast and abstinence as they are written in the Code of Canon Law. It is also true that priests and bishops (who are human beings) promulgate that law and insist that it be kept. However, the misunderstanding comes about by the failure to realize that all that the Church legislates for the good of souls has its source in the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Parents expect obedience from their children, and intelligent parents understand that their right to demand it is not inherent in themselves, but that it comes from God. We are all children of God in the eyes of the Church. Hence, it is no less true to say that the Church as our spiritual mother has the right to demand obedience from all of us. This right is not inherent in the Church as a society, but it comes from God who gave her the authority to bind and loose with the promise that her exercise of this authority would be ratified in heaven.

It is possible for a pastor of souls to accede to the whims and wishes of the fainthearted, but in so doing he does a disservice for which he might answer before the throne of God. He is bound to lead souls to God by the means placed at his disposal by the Church.

Much misunderstanding flows from the lack of appreciation of the meaning of self-denial. Self-denial is not the same as mortification. It is not willingly giving up some material good for a spiritual advantage. Self-denial might be described as the denial of one's own willfulness. I deny my own will by doing not what I want, but what God wants, regardless of whether His will is expressed directly as in the commandments or indirectly through the Church and other lawful superiors.

In Lent and in other circumstances, too, it is this denial of self that merits the reward promised by God. We might ponder these thoughts when we examine the faithfulness of our fulfillment of Lenten regulations. The entire structure of our spirituality is based not on our relationship to the Church or her representatives. It is based on our relationship to God through His Church.

MONDAY, 1ST WEEK OF LENT

In the Lesson of the Mass for today God compares Himself, through the voice of Ezechiel, to a shepherd seeking out his lost and scattered sheep. He speaks of His solicitude for His flock in bringing back the strays, splinting the broken bones, and caring for the sturdy. We are reminded of a similar comparison made by our Lord when He called Himself the "Good Shepherd."

However, today the thought carries forward to something more drastic. The Gospel continues the comparison to a shepherd, but with a difference. Our Lord describes the final judgment in which the sheep will be separated from the goats, one group to His right and the other to His left. To those at His right He will say, "Welcome, favored of my Father! Take possession of the kingdom prepared for you from the beginning of the world" (Mt. 25:34). While to those at His left He will say, "Out of my sight, ye cursed ones! Off into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his ministers" (Mt. 25:41).

It is by our own free choice that we decide whether we will be joined to the sheep or the goats. It is during this life that we are tested and found worthy or wanting. Once the soul has departed the body our eternal fate is beyond change.

Perhaps one of the great consolations is that God seldom abandons anyone to his own willfulness. The Lesson teaches us that God continues the search for souls until they are irrevocably lost. Francis Thompson, a poet of the early part of this century, quite beautifully portrays God in His search for a soul as the "hound of heaven." He dogs the heels of the sinner with grace, never despairing that he will be "converted and live."

We will not know until the final judgment who and how

many have been lost. That is knowledge locked in the mind of God. We never know what exceptional grace may elicit a perfect act of love at the final moment of life. However, while we cannot condemn any soul on our own knowledge, we can safely say that one who has rejected the ordinary graces for a lifetime very probably will not receive an exceptional grace at the end of life.

The only measure of assurance we may attain for salvation comes from living the good life. We may stray, but the divine Shepherd is out to bring us back, if we will. During Lent, in a small way, we try to make up to God for our strayings by penance self-imposed and imposed by law. The value of these pitiful offerings of ours is multiplied in the Blood of Christ. "We know," says St. Paul, "that our old self has been crucified with Christ" (Rom. 6:6). Prayer and penance are the watchwords of the Christian life.

TUESDAY, 1ST WEEK OF LENT

In the Lesson of the Mass for today God speaks with the voice of Isaias telling of His bountiful mercy. There is no one so wicked that he cannot be forgiven, if he comes before God with a truly contrite heart. There is only one unforgivable sin and that is the sin of the man who does not want to be forgiven. Every one of us has seen the marvelous ways of God at work, unfathomable as they are.

The Gospel presents a practical picture of men who are steeped in their own sinfulness. The chief priests and the scribes witnessed the works of God before their very eyes, yet in their obstinacy they refused to accept the evidence. The lame and the blind were made whole as they looked on, and their only reaction was that of anger because our Lord accepted the accolades of children in the temple.

Those of us who have faith find it difficult to understand the psychology of otherwise intelligent people who have the evidence of God's existence before them, yet choose to ignore it. Since stupidity is not the answer, perversity must be. Filled with intellectual pride, they reject without reason that which all men can know.

In viewing these examples of the worst that can happen to man we must remind ourselves that, should anyone cease to strive, the same fate can befall him. Not until we have drawn our last breath can we feel that we have done all that is necessary for salvation. God continues to provide actual graces to each till the end of life. In order to be saved we must continue to co-operate with them.

To think that till now I have served God, therefore I will continue to serve God is the daydream of a spiritual fool. *Corruptio optimi pessima* — The greater the thing the deeper the degradation, if it is corrupted. Spiritual life is not static;

either it progresses or regresses. It is foolhardy to imagine that one can reach a plateau of spiritual growth and remain there without continuing effort. The moment one ceases to strive he begins to slip.

The purpose of Lent is to shore up our spiritual defenses, to mend the breaches in the protective wall of virtue, and to lay by reinforcements for the struggles that are certainly to come. The humility with which we started Lent should make us aware first of all that "we are (not) competent of ourselves to take credit for anything as originating from us. Really our competency is from God" (2 Cor. 3:5).

Yet none of this drastic thinking should be the basis for despair. God has given us a free gift, the virtue of hope, whereby we place our confidence in Him. The answer to the apparent contradiction lies in free will. Either we choose to work with God or we reject Him.

WEDNESDAY, 1ST WEEK OF LENT

The picture of the Jewish people before the coming of Christ is a picture of periodic infidelities followed by sincere repentance and conversion. The philosophy of the ancient Jews was a philosophy of pleasure. For a while they would serve God wholeheartedly, but gradually they would fall away, being enticed by the sensual pleasures they saw manifest in their pagan neighbors. God had to send prophet after prophet to bring them back to Himself and to a realization of the divine mission entrusted to them.

A great destiny was in store for them had they remained faithful to God. After having carried the message of hope for so many centuries, they rejected its fulfillment when Christ appeared in their midst. They spurned the divine King's invitation and were excluded from the kingdom, to be replaced by those whom they scorned, the Gentiles. We have become the Chosen People of God with the mission of spreading the kingdom of God until He comes.

Let us hope that we, too, will not find a day of rejection, as did the Jews. True, the Church will last till the end of time, for such is the promise of Christ her founder, but we may be rejected as a nation because we have lost our sense of mission. We can see possible signs in the South American nations. They have been Christian and Catholic for centuries, yet for decades they have been unable to furnish enough vocations to have broken unto themselves the bread of eternal life.

God always gives sufficient vocations to provide for His Church. Why is it that so few of these calls are answered? Is it because the seed has fallen among thorns "to be choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of this life"?

During Lent we have the opportunity to come closer to

Christ than at any other time during the year. In His sufferings we see more of His human side, something with which we can sympathize because all of us have known pain to some degree. Perhaps during these days of penance we can learn God's will for us and ask for the grace necessary to do it.

Surely there are some who, when they hear the call of the divine Master, are going to answer. In fairness no one can weigh the enticements of the world against the enticements of the convent; these are never known until they have been experienced. In our generation young people get so much, they are apt to forget that they also must give. Nothing worthwhile has ever been achieved without sacrifice. The first lesson of mortification is denial of self. Let us pray God that it bears fruit.

THURSDAY, 1ST WEEK OF LENT

Among the requirements of true prayer is perseverance. We might also add to perseverance its sister, persistence. The gospel story today tells of the Canaanite woman who had her prayer answered because she was persistent. Regardless of the objections made by our Lord, she found an answer. First our Lord ignored her and the disciples asked Him to send her away. Quite literally she was making a pest of herself. In the end she received the favor she asked, the cure of her daughter, and she was also commended by Christ for her deep faith.

On other occasions Christ told parables illustrating perseverance and persistence. There was the man who asked his neighbor for the loan of food when he had unexpected guests. Because he was persistent the neighbor gave him the bread to "shut him up" so he could get back to bed. Another time our Lord told the story of a widow who pestered a judge for justice. Finally to get rid of the woman the judge issued the judgment so as to have some peace.

There are other examples of perseverance in prayer. St. Monica, the mother of St. Augustine, who later became Bishop of Hippo in North Africa, prayed for thirty years for the conversion of her son. We could go on telling stories from the lives of other saints who got what they asked because of perseverance and persistence.

We will never know how many deathbed conversions have been effected because a mother persevered in prayer. What other explanation could there be for the exceptional grace required to bring back a soul that has wandered for years in the morass of sin and neglect?

Thus far we have mentioned instances of perseverance in prayer for the benefit of others, but prayer for personal spirit-

ual and material favors requires no less perseverance and persistence. God sometimes wants to test our faith and trust in Him.

Does God always answer prayer, even persistent and persevering prayer? Yes, He does. Perhaps not in the way we expect, but He does answer. It happens that we ask for things that can be to our spiritual detriment. Then God does not give us what we ask, but He does give something that we need, even though we may not realize it.

God is a loving father, more loving than any earthly father. His delight is to fulfill the reasonable and profitable requests of His children. "Will anyone among you," asks our Lord, "give a stone to his son that asks him for bread—or a snake when he asks for a fish?" (Mt. 7:9-10.) In the first place we ask for the graces necessary to serve God and save our souls; only then should we ask for the material benefits that our hearts desire.

FRIDAY, 1ST WEEK OF LENT

Each individual is responsible for his own actions. The eternal reward or eternal punishment anyone receives must be laid at his own door. There is no predestination to heaven or to hell in the sense that God has decreed for all eternity who is to be saved and who damned, despite the good or evil of their lives.

The problem that besets theologians in this area is not so much a problem of free will as it is the problem of understanding the knowledge of God. While God knows who will be elected and who condemned, He has not decreed the election or condemnation of any.

The greatest theological minds of the Church have floundered in a morass of confusion in trying to resolve this problem; not one of them has as yet arrived at a completely satisfactory answer. Speculatively the problem is interesting and important in that it will bring us to a deeper knowledge of the nature of God, but practically it is of little consequence in that countless souls have been saved without ever realizing that a problem existed.

The points that really matter are detailed in the Lesson from Ezechiel which was chosen for the Mass of today. The evil man can repent and live; the innocent man can sin and die. In either case it is up to the individual. Everyone is created for happiness with God in heaven, but what can God do about those who reject Him? It is not God wanting souls to be damned; it is man willing to be damned. "What pleasure," God asks, "should I find in the death of a sinner. . . ?" (Ezech. 18:23.)

Present uprightness of life is no assurance of salvation. One mortal sin wipes out every claim one has to supernatural reward. "It may be," says the Lord, "the innocent man will

lose his innocence . . . all his upright life shall be forgotten" (Ezech. 18:24). Hence, we are reminded that, while practicing the theological virtue of hope, we must pray constantly for the grace of final perseverance. This is the grace that finds us faithful to God at the moment of death. Strictly speaking we cannot merit it. It comes to us only as the result of insistent prayer and faithful co-operation with the daily graces given us.

The evil man does, he does of himself; while the supernaturally good acts he performs are performed only with the help of God. "Nobody is able to come to me unless the Father, whose ambassador I am, draws him, that I may raise him from the dead on the last day" (Jn. 6:44). However, it is the free act of the human will that accepts or rejects this "attraction." No one, either by his naturally good acts or by prayer, can merit the first grace toward justification. This is a free gift of God, offered, but never forced upon us. Each of us makes his own decision.

SATURDAY, 1ST WEEK OF LENT

Ember Saturdays were the traditional ordination days in the Church. Young men were elevated to the clerical state by tonsure; others advanced in minor orders or subdiaconate; and still others became deacons or were elevated to the holy priesthood by sacred orders. Men do not suddenly become priests at the end of a course of studies. They advance toward the altar by several steps. Some are sacramentals instituted by the Church; the remainder are parts of the sacrament of holy orders as instituted by Christ.

The sacrament of holy orders is conferred only by bishops because they alone, as successors of the Apostles, have the fullness of the priesthood. They alone are capable of transmitting to others the powers they themselves possess. For the priesthood the ordaining prelate lays his hands on the head of the ordinand and prays that he may receive the Holy Spirit. In this basically simple rite the powers of the priesthood come from God to a man.

In speaking of ordinations we are reminded of the ever growing need for more laborers in the vineyard of the Lord. It is sad to contemplate that the population grows more rapidly than vocations are answered. In the Old Testament men were born into a priestly caste. They were descendants of Aaron, the first High Priest of the Mosaic Law chosen by God. In the New Testament there is no priestly caste. God chooses whom He wills.

Unfortunately some from the beginning have refused to heed the call of Christ. There was the rich young man whom our Lord called. He refused because the sacrifices that Christ asked of him seemed too great. There are probably many reasons why men fail to respond to Christ's invitation. It

is safe to say that none of them are good reasons and all of them are worldly reasons.

How many otherwise good parents have thrown up their hands in horror at the thought of a son dedicating himself to the work of the Lord? How many young men have been dissuaded on the plea of their youth and lack of judgment? How many young men have been designedly bribed by the enticements of the world so as to be made to forget "this foolishness"? How many a young man has lost a vocation by trying to walk on both sides of the street at the same time?

Every attraction to the Church and God is not necessarily the sign of a vocation. But all other things being equal, such attraction should be tested in the seedbed of vocations called the seminary. If it is a passing fancy or prompted by improper motives, these things will soon enough make themselves known. Unworthy men have been ordained, but they are few. Too many worthy men have failed to answer the call. God has always given sufficient vocations to care for His Church; too few respond.

MONDAY, 2ND WEEK OF LENT

No soul is lost until it meets its divine Judge at the moment of death. "Where there is life there is hope" is not an idle expression. God grants merciful forgiveness to anyone who asks it with contrition and repentance. His patience with the sincerely repentant sinner is limitless. There are no bounds to the number of times He will forgive.

In these considerations lies the nucleus of another thought. For those who are making an honest effort to serve God Satan reserves a special kind of temptation. We speak here of discouragement. Let us imagine for a moment the "garden variety" of Catholic with a habit of objectively serious sin. After a mission or a retreat he resolves to change his life, to conquer his habit, and to avoid mortal sin. He makes a good confession and prays for the grace to keep his resolution. Temptation comes and through weakness he falls again. However, with a renewed resolve he receives the sacrament of penance and is again restored to the grace and friendship of God, but again he falls. This pattern is repeated time after time. Finally, Satan steps in. Here is a soul that he is losing. He begins to work on the imagination and the emotions; he fosters thoughts of self-pity, hoping that the soul will say, "What's the use? No matter how I try I continue to fail. I might as well give up." This is discouragement.

And souls who are not guilty of serious sin are tempted to discouragement. Satan hopes to weaken their resistance by repeated venial sins, perhaps to the point of making them fall into mortal sin.

In either instance acknowledgment of the mercy of God is a deterrent to such diabolical discouragement. Once we realize the boundless mercy of God and the unlimited num-

ber of times He is willing to forgive we are ready to pick ourselves up and start over again. God knows our psychological make-up better than we do. He knows that by original sin we are in a deprived state with a will that is weak and an intellect that has been darkened. Speaking humanly, these are extenuating circumstances. When He recognizes our sincere sorrow for having offended Him, He is there to take us back.

There is one more important consideration that we must not overlook. Our return to God is not based on our own efforts. To return to God we need the grace of God. Our part enters in when we willingly co-operate with that grace. From experience we know that God is always ready with His grace. He anxiously awaits our call on His mercy. Seldom does He withdraw all grace from anyone. It is our firm belief that hardened sinners are few and far between.

So long as the mercy of God is kept before our minds, Satan will have little success in discouraging us. But a word to the wise should be sufficient. Satan will try.

TUESDAY, 2ND WEEK OF LENT

Many a good work is spoiled by pride. What is done is not done so much to please God as to attract the favorable comments of others. In the Gospel of the Mass for today our Lord censures the Pharisees for their vainglorious behavior in the performance of religious practices. They wanted the recognition of their fellow men for their meticulous observance of the minutiae of the law.

The remedy, or call it a precaution, against falling into such a sin is acknowledgment of our dependence upon God for all the supernatural good we do. If one soul is more fervent or another more devout, it is not because of the efforts or abilities of the individuals themselves. The answer lies in the grace of God which has been given them. While everyone receives sufficient grace, not everyone receives the same amounts of grace. God gives these free gifts as He sees fit, to some more, to others less, but to all enough.

Then, there is another consideration. Of him to whom God has given more grace He expects more. The divine Accountant keeps an exact tally of the graces proffered to each one, and each one will have to account to God for his use of grace.

It should humble us to realize that we are unable to perform any supernaturally good act without the concurrence of God. Too frequently we forget that. Even with no one to notice, we sometimes pat ourselves on the back for the good we have done, as if we had done it alone. All men are capable of naturally good acts through their own efforts, but these have no meritorious value. The rewards they receive can be nothing more than natural rewards.

Our distinct dignity as Christians is that we have been raised to a higher form of life by the sacrament of baptism.

Thus every good act we perform under the influence of God's grace is a potential source of merit. And merit, as we know, is our claim against God for a supernatural reward. Hence, our solicitude should not be to impress men, but to please God.

If we seek human recognition as the Pharisees did, we can be certain that we have already had our reward in the accolades of those whom we have impressed. The praise of men is passing and fickle; often it is given without foundation. God reads the secrets of our hearts and any praise we deserve will come from Him.

Goodness naturally makes itself known and attracts because of its inherent worth. The worldly may call the good hypocrites, but that is because they cannot understand anything that is done unselfishly. We must learn to become impervious to the praise or blame of men. In the supernatural life God alone counts.

WEDNESDAY, 2ND WEEK OF LENT

Ambition is defined as the inordinate desire for preferment. When we presume too much on our own strength, when we consider ourselves superior to others, when we want to dominate them, to rule over them, to impose our will upon them we are ambitious. Such ambition is born of pride.

Ambition is a disorder that shows itself in a number of ways. St. Thomas Aquinas speaks of three manifestations of ambition. In the first place, there are those who seek undeserved honors, honors that are above them. Then, there are those who seek honors for themselves, for their own glory rather than for the glory of God. Finally, there are those who delight in honors for honor's sake, with no thought of making them redound to the benefit of others. In the order established by God a superior's first duty is to seek the welfare of those placed under him.

Ambition invades every sphere of life. We find it in politics. Men want to rule others. They will step on anyone to achieve their goal. How many politicians have been guilty of compromise or of questionable practices in order to obtain the votes of their constituents? We can also find ambition in the intellectual sphere where men will try to impose their ideas on others, even in regard to questions that are open to discussion. We find ambition in civil life where men look for offices of dignity because they can then enjoy the plaudits of the crowd. Yes, we even find ambition among ecclesiastics who seek honors and dignities in the Church while being unable to fulfill the obligations and responsibilities entailed.

James and John were ambitious and they were rebuked by our Lord. The other disciples were rightly indignant when these two put their mother up to asking Christ for the

places of dignity in His kingdom. Their thoughts were of a material kingdom and they had fond dreams of the power they could exercise from the first places next to the throne.

Thus far we have looked at evident examples of ambition. But ambition is far more widespread than one might be led to think. How many lesser ambitions are found in everyday life, your everyday life? People will say, "I was never so insulted in my life" when they mean, "I was not treated as I think I ought to be treated." Do you want to be the center of attraction at a gathering? Do you sulk when someone else is more interesting? If you do, you are ambitious.

A person's worth will be recognized on its own merit. Ambition is based on pride. Remember, pride is the first of the capital sins, the sin that excluded the devils from the presence of God for all eternity. "God resists the proud but gives his grace to the humble" (1 Pet. 5:5).

THURSDAY, 2ND WEEK OF LENT

Both the Lesson and the Gospel of the Mass for today speak of the justice of God in the light of His rewards and punishments. With the voice of Jeremias God says, "There is no riddle like the twists of the heart. Who shall master them? Who but I, the Lord, that can see into man's heart and read his innermost thoughts, to every life awarding what its doings have earned" (Jer. 17:9-10). The Gospel relates a parable of a selfish rich man buried in hell who seeks relief from the beggar whom he ignored. Dives asks that Lazarus be sent to warn his brothers, lest they too be condemned, but Abraham is adamant. He tells Dives that they have all they need in Moses and the prophets for their spiritual guidance.

The justice of God is a terrible thing for those who are found wanting, because it is so absolute. In the judgment of God there is no margin for error. A human judge or a human jury can be deceived and the offender can "beat the rap." With God there are no technicalities of law, there is no lack of jurisdiction, there are no mistrials. At the time of sentencing there can be no plea for clemency. The time for mercy expires with human life.

While no one can be assured of salvation, he can give himself more than an even "break" by living faithful to God day by day. Though there are lapses, even serious lapses into mortal sin, the grace of sorrow and repentance is usually forthcoming. It is those who put off serving God, presuming that the necessary grace will be granted at the end of life, who have every reason to tremble in anticipation of God's justice.

St. Paul congratulated the Philippians for their faithfulness to his teachings, but then reminded them, "Work out

your salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil. 2:12). This is not the fear of God we have because of the remembrance of past sins, nor is it the fear of hell; it is a filial and reverential fear based on the grandeur and infinity of God, coupled with the hope that He will help us. "Overcome my whole being with fear of Thee," says the Psalmist, "I am adread of Thy judgments" (Ps. 118:120).

This gift of fear of the Lord was given as a free gift when we were baptized. It was given in a very special way again when we were confirmed. But having the gift is not sufficient; it must be cultivated. Meditation on the attributes of God, His infinite grandeur, His sovereignty, reflections on the nature of sin as an offense against His infinite majesty, these are the means at our disposal for cultivating this gift. Serve God daily, heed His Church, receive the sacraments, and His judgment will be favorable.

FRIDAY, 2ND WEEK OF LENT

The chief priests and Pharisees were told by our Lord of the consequences of their rejection of Him. "He will put those wretches to a wretched death. And besides, he will lease the vineyard out to other vinedressers, who will give him his due share of the vintage at its proper season" (Mt. 21:41). The children of Abraham had been set apart to carry a message of promise for the world. They were the "chosen people." For centuries God was patient with them, tolerating their repeated infidelities and overlooking their persecution of His prophets. In desperation, it would seem, He sent His own Son, hoping that at least respect would make them tractable. But even Him they rejected.

As a result we, the Gentiles, have become the "vine-dressers." God has high hopes for us. Each generation has a task to perform in spreading the kingdom of God. We must never fall into the error of thinking that Christ delivered His Church into the hands of His priests, that the priests alone do and the laity have done unto them.

Each cell, too, in the Mystical Body of Christ has its task. It has been thus from the beginning. In more recent times a special name has been given to the laity's role. Pope after pope has spoken of Catholic Action — the active participation of the laity in the work of the hierarchy. Pius XII of blessed memory insisted in season and out of season on the lay apostolate. "Go, therefore, and make all nations your disciples" (Mt. 28:19).

The tasks of the apostolate change with needs and times. In the first century the spread of Christianity demanded a different approach than it does in the twentieth century. St. Paul wrote these words to the Corinthians: "God has established in his Church some in the first rank, namely

apostles, others in the second rank, namely inspired preachers, still others in the third rank, namely teachers. After that come wonder-workers, then those with the gifts of healing, then assistants, administrators, and those that speak a variety of languages" (2 Cor. 12:27-28). Today the approach is not to a pagan world steeped in polytheism. In our environment a Supreme Being is at least acknowledged and Christ is known in some fashion or other. Our task is to make known the mission of the Church as founded by Christ and to bring those outside under her influence.

The apostolate may take many forms: the apostolate of example, the apostolate of prayer, the apostolate of suffering, the apostolate of teaching, the apostolate of public life, these and many others according to the abilities of each. "Consider what is the will of the Lord" (Eph. 5:17). Each of us has a place in the mission of the Church. "To each one of us grace has been given to the extent to which Christ imparts it" (Eph. 4:7). Pray for enlightenment and Christ will show you the way.

SATURDAY, 2ND WEEK OF LENT

In the Lesson for today we learn of the collusion between Rebecca and Jacob in lying to Isaac who wanted to bless his first-born son, Esau, before he died. St. Augustine attempts to explain away the deception by saying: "It is not a lie, but a mystery." While we admire his zeal in attempting to protect the good name of Jacob, we do not have to accept his explanation. However, our purpose here is not to judge Jacob.

Lying is defined as speaking contrary to one's mind. For the sake of brevity such a definition is adequate. However, there are other ways of lying without saying anything at all. We use the expression: "Actions speak louder than words." Thus we produce the equivalent of a lie by what we do. For instance, the student who cheats on an examination tells a lie. In handing in a copied paper he equivalently says, "This is the product of my own mind and knowledge." It is sad when we realize how many students, Catholics among them, do not consider cheating in school sinful.

Another fallacy is the so-called distinction between white lies and black lies. How frequently we hear the statement, "Oh, it was only a little white lie." The conclusion drawn is that, since it did no harm, it was not sinful. Lying in any form is always sinful. No reason, no matter how weighty, ever excuses one from telling the truth.

Speech is a faculty given to human beings for one purpose, namely, to communicate what is in their minds to others. Anytime one communicates what is contrary to what is in one's mind the faculty of speech is abused. Now the abuse of any faculty is a sin against the natural law, the law of God in our members. Human relationships are dependent

upon the truthfulness of our words and actions. The man one cannot believe one does not trust.

Deception is not a necessary part of a lie. For example, someone might say: "I didn't break that window." That is a lie, presupposing he did break the window. Now the person to whom the statement was made may have seen him do it; therefore, he was not deceived. While the purpose of a lie is to deceive, it may not always accomplish its purpose; nonetheless it is still a lie.

"Honesty is the best policy" — this is the materialistic approach. If we tell the truth only as a matter of policy, because it accrues to our own benefit, our motive is a low one. No, honesty is the will of God and we tell the truth because we do not want to offend Him. Small lies or big lies, "harmless" lies or harmful lies, white lies or black lies, all alike are offenses against the law of God. We must shun them as we shun any sin, if we want to please God.

MONDAY, 3RD WEEK OF LENT

People look for the miraculous, imagining it sometimes where it does not exist. Many Jews expected the Messias to descend miraculously from heaven into the Temple Court. Naaman the Syrian, seeking a miraculous cure from leprosy, was disturbed because Eliseus only told him to bathe in the River Jordan. The Pharisees were put out because Christ worked miracles in Capharnaum, but did not "demonstrate" for their benefit.

Some people today suffer the same affliction. Not too many years ago a farm wife near Necedah, Wisconsin, alleged that she had been favored with apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary and had received revelations. Good people by the thousands flocked there. Oh, there was a certain spirit of faith, but for the most part an analysis would reveal a secret curiosity to see the extraordinary. The final alleged apparition took place on a rainy day; at noon the clouds parted and the sun came out. The credulous in the crowd claimed that they saw the sun spin as it was reported to have done at Fatima (Portugal) earlier in the century.

The so-called apparitions, if the farm wife saw them, could have been mere hallucinations. The revelations were a poor imitation of the false revelations of Lipa (Philippine Islands) and the true revelations of Fatima; unfortunately in many points they were theologically unsound and in others contrary to Catholic doctrine. The most charitable explanation is psychological. Probably this farm wife was subconsciously seeking the attention she had been denied all her life.

In the Gospel for today our Lord pointed out that miracles are rare. One widow among many and one leper among many enjoyed the miraculous intervention of God. True,

our Lord performed many miracles during His public life, yet not every sick person was cured nor was every dead man brought back to life. As with the prophets, miracles were Christ's credentials of His divine mission.

We have been given the gift of faith which we must exercise. If faith constantly must be bolstered by miracles, it is not worth much. We believe on the authority of God as transmitted to us through His Church. Do we yet seek a sign from heaven to be convinced of the truth?

Miracles still do happen, but God does not interfere with the order of nature as He established it, except for weighty reasons. The miracles required for beatification and canonization are God's way of corroborating human judgment which left to itself can be subject to error. While the infallible decision of the pope certifying heroic sanctity is sufficient, this added corroboration of God should defeat the worst skeptic. Where a miracle is alleged be first of all a doubter; when it is proved, your faith will be strengthened.

TUESDAY, 3RD WEEK OF LENT

Fundamentally good people will hold a grudge for years. In the Gospel of the Mass for today there is a command for them. Our Lord tells us that there should be no limit to the number of times we are willing to forgive. "I do not say, 'as many as seven times,' but 'as many as seven times seven!'" (Mt. 18:22.) Grudges are basically silly; in nine hundred ninety-nine cases out of a thousand the insult or slight that starts them has no basis in fact; they are based on the purest imagination.

Grudges come from one of two sources. Either the person holding the grudge is neurotic or overly proud. If neurosis is the answer then the person is psychiatrically a paranoid. A paranoid is one who has the tendency to feel persecuted, and unreasonably so. In its worst stages such a malady would be called a persecution complex. If the grudge is based on pride, then the individual thinks too much of himself and his own importance. The neurotic might be excused on the plea of mental illness; the proud person can find no excuse, except, perhaps, in a false conscience.

"If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. Why? Because he who does not love his brother whom he sees, cannot love God whom he does not see. Besides we have received this commandment from God: He who loves God must love his brother also" (1 Jn. 4:20-21). There are no words clearer than these words of divine revelation. "Brother" in the context is not only one's blood relation, but every other human being with whom one comes in contact.

A grudge-holding person subconsciously knows that he is doing something wrong. Why else the bromide: "I'll forgive, but I won't forget"? Only God has sufficient dignity to be

truly offended, yet God to whom the past and future are eternally present claims to forget. "It may be the sinful man will repent of all his sinful deeds. . . All his transgressions shall be *forgotten* and his uprightness shall bring him life" (Ezech. 18:21 and 22). If God can forget, certainly, then, His puny creatures can do no less.

In the Lord's Prayer we say: "Forgive us our trespasses (offenses) as we forgive those who trespass (offend) against us" (Mt. 6:12). Are these so many meaningless words when we pray? Are we justified in asking God for forgiveness in the sacrament of penance, when we are unwilling to forgive (which includes forgetting) our brother?

The command of our Lord was this: "Love your enemies; treat kindly those that hate you. . . Forgive and you will be forgiven" (Lk. 6:27 and 38). It might be wise for the grudge holder to read the entire sixth chapter of the Gospel according to St. Luke.

WEDNESDAY, 3RD WEEK OF LENT

The Ten Commandments represent God's will for everyone. Age, sex, or state of life make no difference, all alike are bound to observe and obey. This is the fundamental moral law from which stems all obligation and duty. It is as immutable as God Himself. Morality is not a subjective thing that changes with times or situations or customs. There is no man who can ever say, "God did not mean me when He made His law."

In things that are not sin it is sometimes much more difficult to determine what God's will is for us. For a religious the voice of the superior is the voice of God and in everything that is not sin it is the will of God. The same is true of the priest; he finds the will of God in the voice of his bishop. But even for these there are so many things not determined by wish or by rule that the will of God must be learned by searching for it in prayer. There is no one alive who is not under authority in some fashion, free though we are. Even the Holy Father himself, who spiritually is responsible to nobody but God, must heed the traditions of his predecessors as the infallible voice of God for him.

It would be simple if God directed us as individuals to do this or that in specific circumstances, but God does not act thus. He has left all of us general norms consonant with our state of life. The priest's task is the sanctification of souls, the doctor's task is healing bodies, the teacher's task is training minds and wills in right thinking and right living, the parents' task is raising saints for God. Everyone can find the general trend of God's will for him from the state of life he has chosen. Yet what must be done here and now is dependent upon the inspiration of divine grace.

God gives us many graces for which we do not ask, still

He expects us to pray for the ordinary graces that we need for day-by-day living. It is interesting to check the orations of the Masses assigned in the missal; in every one of them some specific grace is asked of God.

Much of God's will is made known to us through the ordinary teaching authority of the Church. These exhortations begin at the top with the Holy Father and slowly filter through the echelons of the Church until they reach us from the parish altar. Much of this is not of command, much less of law, but even as spiritual suggestions they are representative of God's will. This is not as farfetched as may appear at first blush. Was not Christ's last promise to be with His Church until the end of time, directing and guiding it in the fulfillment of its mission? And is not the voice of the Church the voice of Christ? One might ask, "What safer guide to salvation can any man find?"

THURSDAY, 3RD WEEK OF LENT

The Mass formulary for today differs from others of Lent thus far. It is the first Mass that does not mention the Lenten fast in its orations. The Roman Station of the Mass for today is the church of SS. Cosmas and Damian, two Arabian physicians who were martyred under Diocletian. After their conversion to Christianity they are reputed to have spent their time and talents caring for the needy sick. The thoughts of the Mass are directed toward honoring these two saints as they would be honored on a regular feast day in the calendar of the Church.

Considering the specialized Christian activity of these two saints our thought quite naturally turns to the works of mercy, both corporal and spiritual, as they have been enjoined upon us by Christ. Pope John XXIII spent Christmas Day, 1958, visiting hospitals and prisons. At each visit he spoke briefly, telling those who heard him that his purpose was to fulfill the fourteen works of mercy.

Today, what with organized social services in a multiplicity of agencies, it might seem difficult for individuals to find opportunities to practice the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. Relief agencies care for the bodily needs of most and counseling agencies are equipped to care for some of the spiritual needs. Yet there are opportunities for the individual.

The law of God is contained in the Ten Commandments; these must always be kept. In addition there are works of supererogation, as they are called technically, that we are expected to perform when the opportunity presents itself. While they are not of command, they are of obligation. The works of mercy come under this general heading. Anyone who deliberately neglects to perform a work of mercy toward his fellow man will be displeasing to God. In His descrip-

tion of the Last Judgment our Lord does not even mention the commandments. He dwells exclusively on the fulfillment of the corporal works of mercy.

Despite modern-day organization there are many opportunities to perform the works of mercy. First of all, it would be foolhardy for anyone to think himself capable of performing all of them all of the time; it has never been possible to do so. However, when the opportunity presents itself for performing one or the other of them, we must. This is an obligation of fraternal charity.

Perhaps we overlook the charity we do (or can do) for worthy causes. The contributions you make are works of mercy in the sense in which we have been speaking. Though you do not perform the actual deed, you provide the means to others to perform them in your name. Some undeserving receive the benefits of your bounty, yet that does not diminish your reward, if you gave with a generous heart out of love for God and neighbor. Do not give because it is the thing to do. Give because you love God.

FRIDAY, 3RD WEEK OF LENT

One wonders why the Samaritans of Sichar believed our Lord so readily on the testimony of His word alone. There is no record in the gospel narrative that He performed any miracles to convince them. One thing was extraordinary. He told a woman some of the facts of her life which He, a stranger, ordinarily could not know. After our Lord spent two days with these Samaritans they believed. "Now we no longer believe," they told the woman, "on account of your story. We have heard for ourselves and are convinced that this is indeed the Savior of the world" (Jn. 4:42).

Was a special grace granted to the Samaritans or did they do no more than co-operate with the ordinary means? It would appear that they had only the ordinary means, the preaching of Christ. When they called Him "savior of the world" they understood it in a spiritual sense. We can be quite certain that our Lord did not preach the restoration of the earthly kingdom of Israel.

When our Lord established His Church He provided similar means. He conferred on the chief Apostle and his successors and on the other Apostles and their successors an authority to teach. It is called "the ordinary teaching authority of the Church." Seldom does a Holy Father make use of his personal prerogative of infallibility. Nevertheless whenever he speaks his allocutions or writes his encyclicals, though he may not intend to teach infallibly, he teaches and we must accept. One can never argue that, outside of infallible pronouncements, the Holy Father speaks as a private theologian. On the other hand, no one bishop of himself represents the ordinary teaching authority of the Church, but the coincident teaching of all the bishops taken together does represent the ordinary teaching authority of the Church,

Thus we have a sure guide in matters spiritual. Those who have a false concept of freedom accuse the Church of dogmatism, not realizing that Catholics are relieved of the burden of seeking the truth for themselves and thereby made capable of concentrating on the one important thing, the salvation of their souls. Only intellectual pride will make anyone believe that alone he is capable of ferreting out the truth and only what he arrives at is the truth.

Rather than feeling censored or restricted, we alone can know true freedom. "If you make my teaching your rule of life," says our Lord, "you are truly my disciples; then you will know the truth, and the truth will make you freemen" (Jn. 8:31-32). We ought always to be thankful to God for having established His Church and having provided for it as He has. Only by heeding the pronouncements of the teaching authority of the Church (this is the ordinary means of knowing the truth), can we stay surely on the right road to salvation.

SATURDAY, 3RD WEEK OF LENT

Condemnation of the vicious is one thing, condemnation of the erring is another. While we should not condemn, neither should we condone. The vicious person is one who is steeped in evil and makes no effort to change. The erring person is one who submitted to temptation and probably sorely regrets his sin. The gospel narrative of the Mass for today shows our Lord's reaction; He condemned the vicious and forgave the erring one. "If there is one among you free from sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her" (Jn. 8:7).

The Gospel gives sufficient testimony. The scribes and Pharisees came to Christ not because they were disturbed at the offense against God by serious sin; they came to trap our Lord, but they had to slink away while He wrote their hidden sins in the dust.

But this is not our point here. It is an easy matter to condemn one who has made a mistake. When we speak of mistakes we are not speaking of the mistakes made in ignorance or without malice, we are thinking of deliberate mistakes that are objective sins. Before we reject or judge anyone let us recall that Christ died on the cross for such as these. "Do not judge," says our Lord, "so that you may not be judged; for the sentence you pass will be passed upon you, and the measure you use in measuring will be used to measure out your share" (Mt. 7:1-2).

There is another consideration. God alone knows all the factors that enter into the commission of any sin and He alone is capable of judging the objective malice of each act. Pride would make a man think himself capable of judging as God judges. The very purpose of the Last Judgment is to let men know the unadulterated facts.

Why is it that so many take an unholy delight in speaking of the sins and faults of others? “Strange that you see the splinter in your brother’s eye and do not notice the log in your own” (Mt. 7:3). This form of uncharitableness is based on pride. It is an attempt at self-justification. An analysis of the subconscious thought process would be this: I have my faults, but here is someone who is worse. How often have you heard these thoughts actually expressed? “I may not be the best person, but I certainly never did anything like that.”

Charity does not condone sin or make it appear as right, neither does it condemn the sinner. “Charity . . . takes no pleasure in wrong-doing, but rejoices at the victory of truth” (1 Cor. 13:6). God hates sin, but loves the sinner. His own words would be meaningless, if this were not true. “I tell you, there is joy in heaven over one repentant sinner — more, in fact, than over ninety-nine saints that have no need of repentance” (Lk. 15:7). We must forget our pettiness and our attempts at self-justification. We ought rather to pray that all the children of God learn to love Him.

MONDAY, 4TH WEEK OF LENT

Spite is a terrible thing because it prompts people to so many injustices. The story told in the Lesson of the Mass for today concerns two women, mothers of infants. When the infant of one died she exchanged it during the night for the living infant of the other. In the end, because she could not keep the stolen child, she was willing to see the other woman deprived as well. The immediate purpose of the story is to illustrate the great wisdom of Solomon; however, this other thought is exemplified as well.

We use the expression: "He would bite off his nose to spite his face"; exactly the end product of spite, it always hurts the one guilty of it more than it could ever profit him. You have heard, and you probably know, of persons who stopped going to church because of something the priest did to them. Whom do these people hurt, except themselves? They toy with their eternal salvation for the satisfaction it gives to try to hurt back. It is invariably true that such people hurt no one but themselves.

Or take those who out of spite will do anything to tear down another's character. What they cannot find out of the truth they manufacture. Again a manifest injustice. They attempt to rob another of his good name which is as much stealing as taking his property or money. Here, too, they toy with their eternal salvation for the satisfaction of getting back. Their very tactics make them fall in the esteem of those to whom they confide and, once again, they hurt themselves more than anyone else.

The cause of the bitterness that prompts spite is usually petty and without exception it can be traced to hurt pride. It is difficult to hurt a humble man, because he has already

recognized his own deficiencies before anyone has need to point them out.

Looking at these drastic examples of spite should give us pause to think of the smaller instances of spite that creep into our own lives. The small and petty things we do "to get even." When you are tempted to a spiteful action stop and think: To what good? (This is the practical approach.) Is what I am about to do Christlike? (This is the spiritual approach.) Certainly such approaches can save us considerable emotional and moral discomfiture. Those who are spiritually-minded know that the person who has harmed them, if such be the case, already has his punishment laid out for him in the consequences of his sin. "Do not avenge yourselves, beloved," says St. Paul, "but give place to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine; I will repay, says the Lord'" (Rom. 12:19). Angels with hurt pride lost heaven. Ever since they have striven unsuccessfully out of spite to destroy God. Recall the child's rhyme? "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me."

TUESDAY, 4TH WEEK OF LENT

Anthropomorphism is applying human traits to God. For example, God is spoken of as being displeased. The Old Testament is shot through with anthropomorphisms. Now there is nothing wrong with them, if they are not taken in a strict and literal sense. Anthropomorphisms are natural, since it is easier for all of us to understand things in terms of our own experience. In interpreting them we must, so to speak, immerse them in the fire of abstraction so as to cleanse them of the dross of humanness.

In the Lesson of the Mass for today we find such anthropomorphisms. God is "angry" with the idolatrous Israelites and their golden calf. Moses in his prayer tries to "reason" with God as he would reason with any other man and, we are told, God was "appeased." It would appear that God was on the verge of breaking His promise that the children of Abraham would become a great and chosen nation to possess the Promised Land. He wanted to destroy Israel and make Moses the founder of a new Chosen People.

The burden of Moses' argument is this: "Will you let the Egyptians say that it was a treacherous deliverance, that you had marked them out for death here in the mountains, and no trace left of them on earth?" (Exod. 32:12.) Unbelievers of all ages are prone to judge God. The modern unbeliever scoffs at Christianity. "Christianity," we hear, "is a failure, because it has not changed the world." Every generation has its prophets of gloom who say the same thing in almost identical words. Christianity has not failed. For such as speak thus, let it be said, they have not given it the opportunity to work. What they are looking for is heaven on earth. If Christianity to be a success must change all

men for the best and destroy evil, then they are demanding that God destroy human freedom.

God made us free and God leaves us free. Either we choose Christ or we ignore Him, else our faith will have no worth. If I do what I must and not what I choose, my act is worthy neither of praise nor of blame. The whole concept of reward and punishment is founded on the freedom of choice. True, the purpose of our existence is eternal happiness with God — IF we earn it by free service rendered to Him.

Never is it Christianity that fails; it is the individual Christian who proves himself a failure. When Christianity is given a chance it always produces its effect. Witness the untold saints, canonized and uncanonized. Are they signs of failure?

The seed is in everyone who has been raised to the supernatural life. If it is nurtured, it will grow. Like any plant it must be cultivated, otherwise it will die. God gives His graces to whom He wills in the measure He wills, but to everyone He gives sufficient grace. The problem that may arise is recognizing God's graces as they are given. Like a radio we must be accurately tuned to God's transmitter. Prayer and good will are the tools.

WEDNESDAY, 4TH WEEK OF LENT

Human respect can cause men to act in strange ways. In the long gospel narrative of the Mass for today we hear the story of a man born blind whom Jesus had cured. Among other things his parents were called before the board of the synagogue. Now the Jews had let it be known that anyone who acknowledged our Lord as the promised Messias was to be excommunicated from the synagogue. Thus when the parents were asked about the cure of their son, they refused to give a direct answer. They replied, "We don't know." Then, they passed the buck; they said that their son was old enough to speak for himself.

If we analyze their thinking we might find something like this: If we defend this man, Jesus, and are excommunicated from the synagogue, what will our friends and neighbors think? Human respect came into play. They certainly knew what happened and we are quite safe in presuming that their son told them who did it, yet they lacked the courage to stand up for what was right.

How frequently something similar happens in the lives of many of us. The Church is ridiculed or one of her doctrines is attacked. We stand aloof with no answer or no defense. It is not because we lack knowledge; no, we lack courage. Human respect seals lips that should shout the truth.

In the gospel narrative we note a decided difference between the former blind man and his parents. After they refused to commit themselves, he was recalled and in the process of the examination he taught the Pharisees a little basic theology. Here was a poor and unlettered man speaking to the so-called educated Pharisees. They tried to intimidate him. . . . St. John says, "Then they heaped abuse upon him" (Jn. 9:28). Next they went to ridicule. "You were

wholly born in sin," they said, "and you mean to teach us?" (Jn. 9:34.) Finally in defeat they excommunicated him.

We might take a lesson from this man. With the courage of his convictions he stood up for what was right. He knew what had happened to him and he also knew that only a man of God could have accomplished it. Neither power nor authority could intimidate him.

Do we keep silent "to keep peace" or for fear of losing a "friend"? Have you thought that the one who attacks your Church or your beliefs was not interested whether he lost your friendship? Perhaps you fear making a fool of yourself because you do not have an adequate answer. More shame to you for not knowing! The basic principle is this: No Catholic need ever defend his faith, he is always on the offensive. Unreasonable as it may sound, a Catholic never has to prove that he is right, the attacker must prove him wrong. You have the whole truth, nothing else matters. Who knows? Your courage may lose a foe and gain a friend for Christ.

THURSDAY, 4TH WEEK OF LENT

Both the Lesson and the Gospel for today relate stories of persons restored to life by a miracle. Eliseus restores the child of a Sunamite woman and our Lord revives the son of a widow of Naim. All of us are aware that bringing the dead back to life is an exceptional miracle (if we may describe the exceptional as exceptional). There must be a reason for joining the two stories in one Mass formulary. Certainly it does not indicate a promise to Christians that their dead will be revivified; much less would its purpose be the mere relating of two similar incidents.

A possible purpose comes to mind, namely, to teach the catechumens (and us) that the loss of baptismal innocence (which is spiritual death) is not irreparable. Our Lord has provided a sacrament, "a second plank of salvation," for those who have the misfortune to commit deadly sin. God can and does revivify souls that have died spiritually.

To avoid error let it be stated that the administration of the sacrament of penance has differed in various ages of the Church. For instance, the use of the sacrament of penance in the early centuries was restricted almost exclusively to its primary purpose, the forgiveness of serious sin. In some instances absolution was deferred even until the time of death. There was fear that too easy absolution might lead people to laxity. However, it is incorrect to claim that the Church considered certain sins unforgivable and refused to grant absolution from them.

"Mortal sin is the greatest catastrophe of the spiritual life." The fact that absolution is more easily granted in our day by no means indicates a license to sin. One who commits mortal sins with the thought that he can go to confession, as if

absolution were a magic formula, is toying with presumption of the mercy of God.

The availability of the sacrament of penance also has an advantage; it is a deterrent from despair. Imagine what could happen, if one were permitted absolution only once in a lifetime. It is possible that, after a fall, some would kick over the traces entirely and bring about moral chaos. True, perfect contrition can restore a soul to supernatural life; but who of us can ever be certain of his motive, knowing it to be perfect love of God? The overtones of fear of punishment or loss of reward can color one's motive so easily.

The deep consolation for the sincerely penitent comes from the knowledge that the mercy of God is limitless. God's intimate knowledge of human nature with its concupiscence and its weakness prompted Him to institute this great sacrament of reconciliation. Despite their perversities Christian people are basically good. In the parable of the wedding feast our Lord mentions only one guest without a "wedding garment," and in the parable of the lost sheep He speaks as if only one in a hundred needed repentance.

FRIDAY, 4TH WEEK OF LENT

In the Gospel of the Mass for today our Lord points out to Martha that the words *life* and *death* have more than one meaning. He even uses *resurrection* ambiguously. “‘Your brother,’ Jesus said, ‘will rise again’” (Jn. 11:23). The apparent paradoxes in our Lord’s speech can be reconciled. “He who believes in me will live (spiritually) even though he dies (bodily)” (Jn. 11:26). The same is true of the living. “No one that lives (bodily) and believes in me shall be dead (spiritually) forever” (Jn. 11:26).

The situation was a serious one. Martha had lost her brother by death. Certainly our Lord’s purpose in such a circumstance would not be to confuse, but to console. Unfortunately Martha misunderstood. Even though she had made a marvelous profession of faith in Christ’s divinity, she did not understand that He meant to use His divine power to restore her brother’s bodily life. When our Lord ordered the tomb opened she thought that He was interested only in a last look at His friend. “Master,” she said, “the body stinks by this time; he has been dead four days” (Jn. 11:39). Martha’s mind could never seem to escape the here and now. Our Lord remonstrated with her. “Did I not tell you that, if you have faith, you will see the glory of God?” (Jn. 11:40.)

One hesitates to heap more criticism on this good woman, yet in the few instances we meet her she shows the unhappy facility of never being able to escape the present. Once when our Lord was a dinner guest she was put out because her sister, Mary, was not helping. Christ had to chide her then for her busybody solicitude. “Martha, Martha, you are fretting and greatly disturbing yourself about many things” (Lk. 10:41). Here again the practical Martha is busy leading our

Lord to the tomb, probably telling Him about the nice funeral and the kindness of the neighbors. She is so taken up with the present that she entirely misses what our Lord had promised her. Once again He has to chide her.

How many poor, pious, earthy Marthas there are among us! How many there are who mistake devotions for devotion! Religion to them is the recitation of many and long prayers. Others find their joy in joining religious societies, mistaking meetings and minutes and resolutions for the zealous service of God. For such as these the approach is entirely wrong. They are substituting the nonessentials for the necessary. They sacrifice the end for the means. These people are so busy being zealous that they have no time left to be holy.

The soul of all zeal is prayer, but with this understanding: The duties of one's state of life, the tiresome tasks of daily drudgery, yes, even the recreations we take are acceptable, if they are God-directed. Yet formal prayer has its place and must never be neglected. One must never be too busy to pray; on the other hand one must not be so busy praying that duty is neglected. The here and now must always be understood in terms of hereafter.

SATURDAY, 4TH WEEK OF LENT

Quite frequently we have difficulty understanding the words of our Lord; we get the impression that He is veiling His thoughts in language that only the initiated can understand. To a certain extent this is true, in that He sometimes speaks in symbols and parables and allusions. However, our greatest difficulty comes from the fact that we do not understand the oriental mind. We are accustomed to thinking from point to point in arriving at a conclusion. This is discursive thinking. The oriental thinks in large and complex ideas, taking everything, as it were, all at once. The Gospel for today might confuse us. Our Lord seems to skip from one idea to the other without rhyme or reason. Yet He is speaking of one matter only. He is telling the Pharisees who He is.

He does so first by allusion. "I am the light of the world" (Jn. 8:12). The Pharisees do not miss the allusion. They recognize the passages of the Old Testament where the promised Messias is called "the light of the world." That they understand is beyond doubt. "You are testifying on your own behalf," they say, "your testimony is nothing" (Jn. 8:13).

Then, in no uncertain terms our Lord tells them that He is the Son of God in the strict sense of the words. And He points out that their only reason for not acknowledging it is because their minds are steeped in materialism. They judge on appearances, on human standards, not delving beneath the surface to find the truth.

One wonders how many today are guilty of the sin of the Pharisees. How many fail to recognize that the voice of the Church is the voice of Christ, that, in a mystical sense, the Church is Christ? When the ministers of the Church speak

things not to their liking, they refuse to accept, interpreting directions and injunctions as the words of mere men.

“*Sentire cum ecclesia*” is the first axiom of Christian activity. It might be described as feeling and thinking as the Church feels and thinks. In a way it is very much like what psychologists call *empathy*. It is projecting ourselves, so to speak, into the mind of the Church.

Priests and bishops may be criticized for their temporal administration (that is not the purpose of holy orders), but when they speak the word of God or speak the mind of the Church they are not propounding their own ideas, but Christ’s. Criticism of the Church by her children is more frequently than not prefaced by “I can’t see why . . .” Reasons are not always apparent. To expect them always to be is to act like a modern-day Pharisee. The man who asks why in rebellion is un-Christian. One only asks why in search of the truth. So long as the Holy Spirit guides the Church (and He will until the end of time), we can be certain that even what we do not comprehend is for our salvation.

MONDAY, 1ST WEEK OF THE PASSION

The Lesson for today recalls the mission of Jonas the Prophet to the great city of Niniveh. The evil of the city was so great that God threatened to destroy it in forty days, if the people did not mend their ways and do penance. Twice God sent Jonas. The first time he was afraid and tried to hide from God. We recall how he was cast into the sea and swallowed by a large fish, later to be deposited alive on the shore. God commanded him a second time to go to Niniveh; this time he obeyed.

When the Jews asked our Lord for a proof of His authority, He told them that no proof but that of Jonas the Prophet would be given them. "A headstrong and adulterous nation demands a proof of my claims! But a proof will not be given it except the proof that Jonas gave: just as Jonas spent three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so the Son of Man will spend three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Mt. 12:39-40). Scripture scholars take our Lord's citation of this incident as proof positive of its historical truth.

One might wonder why God warns some people before punishing them, while He leaves others blissfully steeped in their iniquity. Sodom and Gomorrah were given no warning of their impending destruction. Those evil men died in their sins with no last chance for repentance. Baltassar, a Chaldean king, was warned of his imminent death and the destruction of his kingdom by the handwriting on the wall. And here again a pagan city, Niniveh, was warned by God to mend its ways or suffer destruction.

We might ask why God does not warn the world today of its evil ways and the consequences that will surely follow upon them. But God does warn. If the voice of the Church

is not enough, there are always "the signs of the times." We can point to incidents in Christian history that appear to be the judgment of God at work. During the transmigration of nations Attila the Hun was called "the scourge of God" because some saw in him an instrument of divine retribution. We might even see something similar in the great religious rebellion of the sixteenth century which rent the fabric of Christ's robe and tore it to shreds.

Why is it in times of great wars so many return to God and His Church? Perhaps subconsciously this human savagery convinces them that God is displeased. Might not the state of the world today be a warning that the hand of God will not be stayed much longer, unless men change their ways? Christ's prophecy of the end of the world tells us that the destruction will come by fire. Could it be that a thermo-nuclear holocaust will wipe out all civilization? Men cannot forget God for long. Sometime, somehow He permits the consequences of their evil to engulf them. History gives adequate proof that every civilization that has fallen has provided the means of its own destruction. Is ours to be an exception?

TUESDAY, 1ST WEEK OF THE PASSION

We read today of the Prophet Daniel cast into a pit of hungry lions. His enemies had planned this means for his destruction. But God protected Daniel and through the instrumentality of the King of Babylon destroyed his enemies. A marvelous point in the story is God's intervention in providing food for Daniel to sustain his life.

We might jump to the obvious conclusion, saying that God takes care of His own, even if He must perform miracles to do so. However, there is another possible lesson that might be drawn from this story of Daniel and Habacuc. God takes care of His captive Church, even when the ordinary means of sustaining it are not at hand. As evidence we might recall the Church at Nagasaki, Japan, which for two hundred years preserved the faith with neither priests nor sacraments, other than baptism. Or we might recall the Church in Scotland in the days of the Reformation which sustained its faith by gazing at the corporal used in the last Mass offered there. Or, from a different point of view, we might point to the Lutheran congregation in Sweden that continued for generations to bow to a spot on the whitewashed wall, not realizing that an obliterated image of the Blessed Mother was beneath it.

Both Pius XII of blessed memory and John XXIII have spoken of the "silent Church," that portion of the Church which is being persecuted by the Soviets and their satellites together with the Church in China where ambitious ecclesiastics are co-operating with their communistic overlords to bring about a schism of no mean proportions. But God always provides an Archbishop Stepinac or a Bishop Ford to show the way and the mission of the Church is accomplished despite the efforts of evil men to destroy her. The

Christ may be buried, but the time always comes when it steps forth from its tomb with freshened vigor. While dormant, it is never sleeping.

Could not God destroy those men who continue to crucify the Mystical Body of His Son? Yes, He could. But He will no more interfere than He did with the Jews and Romans who crucified His real Son. And why not? All we can do is hearken back to God's words to Israel: "By the full height of heaven above earth my dealings are higher than your dealings, my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isa. 55:8). In other words, God does not enlighten us as to His reasons for permitting what He does.

God always does take care of His own, but seldom does He intervene miraculously as He did for Daniel. "The blood of martyrs is the seed of the Church" is an axiom proved by history. To borrow from mythology, new warriors of God spring forth from the blood of the Mystical Body of Christ. God's prophecies are never empty promises. In the beginning He said: ". . . and the gates of hell shall not prevail against (My Church)" (Mt. 16:18). We bide our time in prayer for the "silent Church." Eventually God will be victorious.

WEDNESDAY, 1ST WEEK OF THE PASSION

The gospel narratives chosen for the Masses of this week detail events in the last months of our Lord's public ministry. They show the efforts of inimical Pharisees to stop Him. The Pharisees were men of political, as well as religious, power. When they spoke the people "jumped." From the beginning of His public life our Lord exposed them for what they were, hypocrites and men with little or no active faith. We can imagine that they would develop and foster a bitter hatred for the one who put the finger on their weaknesses.

We know that finally they devised a plan for putting our Lord out of the way (or so they thought). However, all their efforts were not restricted to schemes and plans with an outward semblance of legality. On occasion after occasion they tried to take matters into their own hands. A few times they attempted to pitch Christ over a cliff and on any number of occasions they wanted to stone Him to death. In each instance they were frustrated because, as Scripture says, "His time was not yet come."

The common people were deathly afraid of them because of their power in and out of the synagogue. They suffered terrible frustration as they saw their authority wane and as they realized that they were totally helpless against one man and His small band of peasants and fishermen.

Instead of seeing God active in their midst, they were self-centered enough to want only to worship the god created to their own image and likeness. Although Sacred Scripture in these narrations gives no evident intention of teaching a spiritual lesson, we can find one. Too many of us act as the Pharisees did, at least in our fundamental thinking. We create the god we want, rather than learn of the God who is.

God is a personal God, but He is not my own little god,

satisfying my own little needs. God is the Lord and Father of all and because He is God He can give me love and attention as if no one else existed, but as soon as I begin to act and think as if no one else existed I am failing to recognize God for what He is. The Pharisees seemed to have made such a mistake. God was the God of Israel and in their jaded thinking the Pharisees were Israel. It would appear that their thinking was something like this: I do not what God approves, God must approve what I do.

The first step that everyone must learn is humility. I am important enough that God decreed from all eternity that I should be, but I am not so important that God needs me. Since God created me, God wants me; hence, God loves me. Though love must be reciprocal, it is only right that we accept God on His own terms, because there is no equality between the Lover and the beloved.

THURSDAY, 1ST WEEK OF THE PASSION

Simon the Pharisee seems to be of a somewhat different cast than the Pharisees we are accustomed to meet in the Gospel. His motives might not have been entirely disinterested, but there is no indication that his purpose was to trap or to discredit our Lord. One has the feeling that Simon invited Jesus because he wanted his table graced with the presence of a recognized prophet. He might have been like many of our people who invite the priest to a dinner party because they feel that his presence in some way lends tone to the gathering. Simon, however, is really unimportant to the story. The incident of the narrative is a particularly touching one. A sinful woman has an evil past wiped out because she loves God.

We are not told in any preface what caused this woman, who was a prostitute, to decide to change her life and seek forgiveness. It seems right to speculate that, in addition to internal grace, there must have been an external grace involving our Lord in some way. In the psychology of grace, as in human psychology, we know that it requires a powerful motive to overcome a strong habit.

An important point in the story is this: With the grace of God nothing is impossible. Here is a woman whose livelihood was sin, yet she found it possible to break with the past completely. There is no positive information that she did not lapse into her former way of life. Though some identify Mary, the sister of Martha, Mary Magdalen, and this woman as the same person, we have no certitude in this matter from the Gospels themselves. Since she is not named, we could suppose that she is distinct from the others and as such we would have no further mention of her in the Gospel. Nonetheless there is a feeling about the telling of the story that

makes one want to think that her decision was effective, so that she adhered to her resolution till the end of her life. Her case is by no means unique in Christian history. Augustine of Hippo turned from wanton to saint. On a lesser plane we see such changes almost daily. Confirmed alcoholics desert their maudlin past to become respected and productive members of society.

Not every conversion is as striking as some of these. We are more accustomed to seeing repeated falls and renewed resolutions precede the final victory. Habits, both good and evil, are difficult to break. However, by the grace of God habits of sin can be overcome. What is objectively serious sin subjectively may have little malice in the sight of God. Who is aware of every factor and every force converging on a soul? In the knowledge of God each new start may be progress without each fall representing a loss.

There is one requirement for final victory — dependence upon God. All the suggested means — avoiding the occasions, prayer, the sacraments — are meaningless and worthless so long as anyone does not firmly grasp the hand of God. To depend on one's own strength presages defeat. The willingness of God to forgive repeatedly is the first defense against discouragement.

FRIDAY, 1ST WEEK OF THE PASSION

It takes some thinking to analyze the reasoning of the chief priests and Pharisees in the Gospel for today. We are told that a number of informers who had witnessed the resurrection of Lazarus, probably with the hope of making a "broad foot" for themselves with the authorities, reported everything that Jesus had done. Being at wit's end to stop *this man*, they called a meeting of the Sanhedrin to take action. The Sanhedrin had to admit that our Lord was performing miracles and these miracles were creating a large following for Him. Their greatest fear was that in following and listening to Christ the people would be alienated from their authority.

Now we know that it was Roman policy to permit a certain amount of religious and political autonomy to the member nations of the empire, and Palestine was no exception. In Palestine the Sanhedrin represented such autonomy. However, the autonomy was not absolute, since everything ultimately was subject to the supervision and approval of the local Roman governor. The reasoning of the Sanhedrin seems to be something like this: Rome has invested authority in this council. Should it appear that we have lost control of the people, the Romans will step in to take over all jurisdiction because they will feel that we are incompetent.

It would seem that the debate was long and varied. That they agreed on the problem is as evident as the indication that they could not agree on the solution. What the suggested solutions might have been is beyond the realm of speculation. Caiphas, the high priest, as presiding officer finally had to step in to bring the fruitless debate to a close.

His solution was to find some legal way of executing our Lord and thus ridding themselves of Him.

We are told that his expedient solution with its accompanying reason was, unbeknown to him, an inspired prophecy. Here is evidence that sometimes God uses the designs of evil men to produce good. The Sanhedrin was little aware that its decision taken for an evil purpose was fulfilling God's plans for the redemption of the world.

The "problem of evil" in its simplest statement is this: How can a good God permit evil to exist in the world? A basic answer, as given by St. Thomas Aquinas, is that God permits evil that a greater good may ensue. Now that, we realize, does not solve the problem, it merely gives the foundation for an answer. Where God is involved more frequently than not we cannot answer "why." Original sin itself was an evil producing good. On Holy Saturday the Church sings: "Oh happy fault, that was worthy to have such and so worthy a redeemer!" (Exsultet.) Seldom will we recognize God's good and fruitful purposes at work; nevertheless we can be assured that the Providence of God is watching over His creation.

SATURDAY, 1ST WEEK OF THE PASSION

Our Lord's triumphant entry into the Holy City was the last public recognition tendered Him before His death. His appearance in Jerusalem at this time is somewhat surprising, since He had been remaining in seclusion for a number of months. Even at the feast of Lights in early December He had not appeared publicly in Jerusalem or in the temple because already at that time the Jews were plotting His death.

The resurrection of Lazarus had become a particularly sore spot for the Pharisees. More than anything else it seemed to be creating a tremendous following for our Lord. The high priest and his crowd were so disturbed about the situation that they seriously thought of killing Lazarus, just to get him out of the way.

Possibly the only thing that prevented them from moving against Jesus on Palm Sunday was prudence. Jerusalem was filled with strangers who had come for the Passover. Word of the miracles and teachings of Christ had spread into the Jewish Dispersion. It was only human that these people, when they heard that Jesus was approaching Jerusalem, should want to see Him. With such an enthusiastic crowd the interference of the Pharisees, either by attempting to disperse the crowd or by capturing Jesus, could have led to a riot. Certainly this was something the Pharisees could not afford to chance so close to the major feast of Israel. The fear of rioting constantly plagued them. They saw it as a constant threat to any attempt to apprehend Jesus publicly and they were at a loss for a scheme to do it secretly, until Judas gave them the opening.

History repeats itself. The enemies of the Church fear to make a frontal attack, lest the consequence get out of control and defeat their efforts. Like the Pharisees they are

careful to give their schemes the aura of legality. In these United States the overworked crutch is the guarantee of freedom of conscience. Supposedly everything is open and aboveboard so long as it can be cloaked in the respectability of religion. Did not the Pharisees act in an almost identical manner? It was not Christ they wanted, so they said. Their motives were "idealistic"; they had to do what they were doing to preserve the traditions of the Mosaic Law and to protect themselves against Roman domination (sic!).

However, these modern-day Pharisees succeed no more than did their ancient counterparts. The apparent defeat of the cross became the most eminent success of history. The Church is crucified in individuals or as a unit, but much to their dismay it always rises above the apparent defeat. Each attack, instead of weakening her, gives her added strength. Judgment blinded by frustration leads them to set the stage for further frustrations. The Church remains calm in the face of attack because she knows that, since God is with her, no one can really be against her.

MONDAY, 2ND WEEK OF THE PASSION

It almost seems that St. John speaks with peculiar venom when he analyzes the motives for Judas' remark about caring for the poor. He calls him a thief who had been dipping into the common funds entrusted to his charge. Our Lord rebuked Judas and the reprimand deeply wounded his pride. With rebuke festering in his mind he planned revenge. He made up his mind to betray our Lord into the hands of the chief priests and Pharisees.

During our Lord's public life thousands of people followed Him; but for the greater part the crowd was a changing one. A smaller group traveled with Him from time to time; only twelve were with Him constantly. These last He had chosen for a special mission and He wanted them trained under His own supervision. These were the first men called to the priesthood in the New Dispensation and Judas was among them.

There can be no doubt that Judas had a vocation to the priesthood. In the first select group of twelve no one could possibly have insinuated himself, since our Lord had picked them personally and by name. There have never been priests since that time who could claim the same intimacy for their call from Christ.

Judas at the time of his call was probably no better or no worse than any of the others. Nathanael is the only one of whom we hear our Lord make a remark. "Look! Here is a true Israelite," He said, "a good and honest soul!" (Jn. 1:47.) In the beginning Judas had high hopes of what he could do for God, what service he could render the Messias. Where he slipped along the way we are not told. Did he steal from the common purse, as many after him have done, only with

an intention of "borrowing" to tide himself over a rough spot? That is something we will never know.

Certainly his constant association with Christ was no less a grace for him than it was for the others. Why did he fail to co-operate with it? That is something we never understand in many a lost vocation. Perhaps Judas was impressed with the prestige that close association with the Messias accorded him, but was not willing to make the sacrifices it entailed. Again that is something we will never know.

Since Judas' time there have been others and there are others today who have become "traitors." (We do not speak here of those who became priests for unworthy motives.) As with Judas we know what they have done, but we do not know the reason why. We can but pray that these "shepherds in the mist" do not follow Judas all the way. It is terrifying what our Lord said of him: ". . . better for that man if he had never been born" (Mk. 14:21). Charity demands particularly fervent prayers for fallen priests, because once God must have loved them in a very special way.

TUESDAY, 2ND WEEK OF THE PASSION

It is a striking experience during the Passion of our Lord to watch bold and boastful Peter deny his Master. A human failing so evident in Peter is his impetuosity. Peter had an unhappy facility for speaking before he thought. On more than one occasion Peter's impetuosity brought him to grief. Once he saw our Lord walking on the water and he wanted to do the same. Our Lord invited him to come out, but on the waves he became frightened and began to sink. After the Last Supper our Lord told the Apostles that they would show themselves cowards, but Peter had to boast, "Even if all the rest are shaken in their faith in you, I shall never be shaken in mine" (Mt. 26:34). From the Gospel we know what happened.

True, Peter showed courage in the garden. He used his sword and cut off the ear of Malchus. He even managed to get into the inner court of the high priest's palace. But when the chips were down and he thought he might be caught he lied his way out at the expense of saying he did not know our Lord.

One thing strikes us. Every time Peter's impetuosity is reported it is always prompted by his extreme love for our Lord. He was perfectly sincere in everything that he did and said. It just never occurred to him that he could not always fulfill what his overflowing heart promised.

It is interesting to compare Judas and Peter. Both were guilty of betraying our Lord and both of them regretted their action almost as soon as it was done. Judas fell into abysmal despair and hanged himself with a halter. Peter's heart overflowed again with love and he wept. Judas could have been taken back had he only learned the lesson that God is love.

Perhaps our Lord wanted to teach these men of whom He expected so much that despite their close association with Him they were yet possessed of "too, too human flesh." Every last one of them ran away after our Lord was captured. The only one who seems to have had any courage was the beloved John who was at Calvary with Mary. Where were the other ten? Very probably hiding behind locked doors. No one of this group made a move to claim Christ's body for burial. It took outsiders to bury Him and women to think of embalming Him.

For three years Peter had been the recognized leader and spokesman. Now he was worthless. However, in the years that followed Peter showed his mettle, after he received the special gift of fortitude. He and the other "cowards" all died for their faith in the Master.

We might learn a lesson from Peter. Many deficiencies can be overlooked and forgiven, if we have deep and abiding love for God. Martyrs do not become martyrs of their own choosing, only those to whom God gives the strength.

WEDNESDAY, 2ND WEEK OF THE PASSION

Pontius Pilate was a man of political expediency. His appointment as governor of Judea was no prize political plum, yet even in this out-of-the-way place he was still a member of the emperor's official family. Like any other imperial appointee he knew that he lived or died politically on the basis of his record. Should any word of trouble in his territory reach Rome, he was through.

When the Jews brought our Lord before him to confirm the death sentence they had already passed Pilate's native sense of justice recognized the lack of evidence. There is no doubt that he was fully aware of local talk concerning Christ and his altercations with the chief priests and Pharisees. He was also aware that Mosaic Law had not been violated by Christ and that the Jews' motive was to get Him out of the way permanently, but under the guise of legality.

He was on the horns of a dilemma. Justice demanded the case to be thrown out of court. But Pilate realized that the accusations — inciting to sedition, refusal to pay taxes, and claims of kingship — looked like political crimes and the Jews would not hesitate to perjure themselves before the Imperial Court, if they did not have their way.

History shows what subterfuges he employed to extricate himself. He sent Christ to Herod on the plea that his court did not have proper jurisdiction. When that failed, he ordered Christ, whom he knew was innocent of any crime, to be scourged. He hoped that the sight of blood, if it did not excite pity, would at least satisfy the blood lust of the mob. Once again the expected reactions were not forthcoming. Finally, he played his trump card. A short time before a certain Barabbas was imprisoned at the insistence of the Jews for sedition and murder. The activities of Barabbas

had created quite a stir in Judea. Pilate reasoned: Certainly they will not take a convicted murderer in preference to an innocent man whom they have brought before me out of spite. But again Pilate misread the reaction of the mob. With a last show of defiance he washed his hands of the whole affair and gave them their way.

Expediency causes many sins. Christ is condemned to be crucified over and over again so that some individual can gain or retain a material advantage. Certainly you have heard of men who have joined forbidden societies and renounced their faith because they thought it would assure them a lucrative position. Or what of the girl who will not reject the advances of her boy-friend because she is afraid she may lose him? Any time we give sin the choice over God our name is Pilate. Every time we commit sin because it is expedient we condemn Christ to death.

THURSDAY OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

Today we mark the anniversary of the institution of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass and of the ordination of the first priests of the New Dispensation. In our day when Holy Mass is offered so frequently and in so many places we may forget that it was not always so. When the Apostles began to offer Mass we do not know; we do not even know who, after Christ, offered the first Mass. It would seem probable that Peter as chief apostle was accorded the privilege; however, there is no means of proving such an assertion.

It is not too much to say that the Apostles at the Last Supper did not fully comprehend what was taking place when our Lord changed bread and wine into His body and blood. It was only looking back with perspective that clarified many a matter in their minds. After our Lord's resurrection the Apostles were lost. They knew He was alive, yet they saw Him only when He wanted to appear to them. It seemed that all their hopes for the establishment of the Messianic kingdom and the restoration of Israel must be dashed. Without the leadership of the Master they had no concept of what to do. Peter knew but one trade and he decided to return to it. Together with Thomas, Nathanael, James, John, and two unnamed disciples he returned to his boats and his nets.

But what wonderful enlightenment when the Holy Spirit came upon them on Pentecost. It was like a veil torn from before their eyes when they gained insight into all the things our Lord had said and done. Imagine the awe that struck them when they realized the power they had in sharing the priesthood of Christ, when they understood that the Master had not left them at the ascension, but could be brought into their midst at will.

We are able to trace the development of the Eucharistic cult almost from the earliest ages of the Church. Today our entire Christian life is centered around it. Our churches are built in the truest sense of the words as "houses of God." The architecture is so conceived that all attention is focused on the tabernacle and the altar. The sacrifice of the Mass is the hub around which all the worship of the Church turns.

In our own generation St. Paul's teaching concerning the Mystical Body has been brought to the fore, particularly in reference to the Mass as community worship. Frequent communion has become the rule rather than the exception that it was for so many centuries. Are we going too far when we say that we are living in the golden age of the Holy Eucharist? I think not. Slowly our people are learning to do the parts of the Mass that are theirs. We pray the day will come when every church will resound with all voices loud and clear lifted in praise to God.

FRIDAY OF THE PASSION AND DEATH OF THE LORD JESUS

Today is the commemoration of the most magnificent contradiction of history. The well-engineered schemes of the chief priests and the Pharisees came to naught. What looked to them like success was defeat. In the evil they did they unwittingly became the instruments that made possible the redemption of mankind. They came to Calvary to scoff and remained to hear a pagan confess this man to be the Son of God. They sacrificed a victim to preserve Mosaic traditions only to see the Holy of Holies bared to public gaze. The murder they perpetrated made the very priesthood they possessed meaningless, and the symbols they represented were rendered meaningless as well. Had they understood, even the last words spoken by Christ on the cross deprived them of the satisfaction of taking His life. "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Lk. 23:46). Once He had said: "Nobody can rob me of (my life). No, I lay it down of my own will. I have power to lay it down, and power to take it back again. Such is the charge I have received from my Father" (Jn. 10:18).

We look at the death of Christ from a different perspective than the Apostles. We see the glories of the cross as the redemptive act of the Son of God. To the Apostles the apprehension, condemnation, and crucifixion of our Lord must have been a terrible blow. A major portion of their thinking was centered around the material restoration of Israel. Christ would be the king and they would be His faithful lieutenants. With Christ dead on the cross all this seemed an impossibility. Their hopes were raised after Christ had risen from the dead and even in the last moments before the ascension they expected the kingdom to be restored.

"Lord," they asked, "will you at this time restore the kingdom of Israel?" (Acts 1:6.)

We must not be too harsh on them. After all they were in the very midst of everything that happened. We stand off after twenty centuries with an opportunity to analyze and correlate the whole of our Lord's life as reported in the Gospel. Our relationship with Christ is so much different than theirs. They lived and ate and spoke with a very real man who was a personal friend in a very real sense. Had we been in their place, very probably we would have reacted in a similar manner.

Then, too, men struck with fear certainly are not capable of straight thinking. We must remember that Christ was condemned and executed. They had been His intimate associates for three years and they were known as such. They feared that the hatred of the chief priests would embrace them as well, if they were found. Would any of us have done otherwise in similar circumstances?

Christ's death on the cross is almost impersonal to us. Rather than think of it in terms of the pain it entailed we are inclined to think of it in terms of the result it accomplished. Even today we are not free of the contradiction of the cross: Death purchased life.

PASCHAL VIGIL

In the ancient Church this was the day of baptism. Those catechumens who had finished their course of instruction and passed their examinations were presented to the bishop for baptism. The reasons for baptizing on this day are very apt. Baptism was by immersion and as such symbolic of death and resurrection. "Buried with him by baptism," says St. Paul, "you also rose with him by your faith in the power of God who raised him from the dead" (Col. 2:12). In other words, being plunged into water they died to sin and rising from the water they began to live in Christ.

We who are baptized personally renew on this night the vows that were made in our name. We renounce Satan and his works and we profess our faith in God and His Son, Jesus Christ, together with the Holy Spirit. Finally, we recite the perfect prayer composed by our Lord as a petition for divine aid.

It is rather sad that baptism is no longer a "public" function in the Church. Outside of missionary countries with many adult baptisms the symbolism of the rites are all but lost, because so few witness them.

From one point of view baptism is first in importance among the sacraments. It is the doorway to the rest, since no one can receive any other sacrament unless he is baptized. For the Christians of the early Church it was a noteworthy event. It gave them for the first time the privilege of participating in the sacrifice of the Mass. As catechumens they were formally dismissed by the deacon before the recitation of the Creed. During the week that followed their baptism they dressed in white, symbolic of their baptismal purity.

At the moment of baptism each of us becomes a living

cell in the Mystical Body of Christ. We are united to the brotherhood called the communion of the saints. Each according to his condition is capable of offering to God the perfect sacrifice of the New Law in virtue of a share in the priesthood of Christ. In baptism we are made Godlike, sharing in our limited way God's own nature. The spiritual character impressed in baptism remains forever. For the living it is the mark of our citizenship in the kingdom of God.

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These conclude our thoughts for Lent. They have been taken from the liturgy which is so rich in points of meditation. What has been presented here are but drops from that vast ocean of thought, the Mass formularies. Each Mass can be a wellspring of spirituality, if we but take the time to plumb its depths. This is the heritage of the Church which can bring us to share our inheritance with Christ.





